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S P E E C H

OF

SAMUEL J.^r TILDEN

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IN THE

DEMOCRATIC STATE CONVENTION,

AT



ROCHESTER, OCTOBER 4, 1871.

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Reverently I thank God that when midnight darkness brooded over the Republic, and the true men who were guarding the sacred traditions of free government created by Jefferson and vindicated by Jackson—and upheld in our State by the Clintons, Tompkins, Van Buren, Wright and Marcy—sat at their watch despondent, the uplifted cloud begins to show its silver lining and there is revealed the dawn of a new and better day. The Democracy, burnishing its armor and purifying its ranks, advances to fight anew the battle against centralism and corruption to which seventy-five years ago it was first led by Thomas Jefferson in the nation and by George Clinton in this State.

Those dangers have recently assumed vastly greater dimensions than at the birth or at any other time during the existence of the Republic. Mankind naturally fear the evils they have last experienced, even after those evils have passed away and others, of the opposite character, have taken their place. It is a maxim of history that government is always strengthened by unsuccessful insurrection. We have just emerged from a vast civil war in which we have conquered a rebellion undertaken to break up our federal government. Disunion is crushed, slavery is dead forever, the suffrage is irreversibly given to the colored race, the original object of the war is accomplished, every natural result is attained; and yet in our recoil from a danger completely passed we rush blindly towards the opposite peril. The equilibrium of our whole political system is in danger of being overthrown, and a despotic and corrupt centralism established. The whole value of the arrange-

ment by which our world is kept in its place in the solar system is in the balance between two opposing forces. It would matter little to us which of these forces should be allowed to prevail. If the centrifugal tendency should dominate, our planet would shoot madly into the realms of endless space, far away from the source of heat and light and life, until every living thing upon its surface would perish. If the centripetal tendency should prevail, the earth would rush with inconceivable velocity towards the sun until it would be engulfed in the burning mass.

So it is with the adjustment of powers between the State and Federal governments; disunion and centralization are equally fatal to good government. Disunion would generate the centralism of military despotism in the separate States. Centralism attempted over areas and populations so vast would break the parts asunder and fill our continent, as it has every other, with rival nations.

Our wise ancestors devised the only system possible to avoid these opposite evils. They formed a Federal government to manage our foreign relations, to maintain peace and unity between the States, and to administer a few exceptional functions of common interest; and they left the great residuary mass of governmental powers to the States. The Democratic party has carried on the Federal government for fifty of the seventy years of the present century.

Its creed is comprised in two ideas: First, to limit as much as possible all governmental power, enlarging always and everywhere the domain of individual judgment and action; secondly, to throw back the governmental powers necessary to be exercised as much as possible upon the States and the localities, approaching in every case the individuals to be affected. These ideas dominate over the Democratic party, and find in it their best representative. The opposite ideas—to meddle with everything properly belonging to individuals and to centralize all governmental powers—express the tendencies of the Republican party. Under their inspiration the Fed-

eral government is rapidly seizing upon all the powers of human society. It has assumed to regulate the suffrage and threatens to take the control of all elections. It perverts the power to raise revenue into a means of dictating what kinds of business men shall employ their labor and capital in; of giving bounties and granting monopolies; of enriching favored classes by impoverishing the earnings of the people. It has drawn within its power all the banks; it has begun to create insurance corporations, and it yearns to take jurisdiction of all railroad companies. Its career of usurpation, if continued a few years longer, will involve all the business, all the contracts and all the property of individuals, and will populate Washington with the lobbies of thirty-seven States.

I oppose centralism because it is incompatible with civil liberty. Forty millions of people, guided by a single hand, would sweep over all dissent and all resistance of isolated or unorganized individuals. Look at France. Half a million of office-holders and half a million of soldiers moved from the centre make civil liberty impossible.

I oppose centralism because it creates an irresponsible power, and an irresponsible power is always corrupt. A government ruling all the affairs of individuals and localities from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the great lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, would be the most incompetent for what it would undertake, the most oppressive, the most irresponsible and the most corrupt government of which history affords any example. It would repeat and exaggerate the crimes of the worst governments in the worst ages. Already the system is maturing its fatal fruits. Demoralization in public trusts prevails to an extent never before known in this country, and scarcely believed to be possible.

The mass of men of all parties are pure in their intentions, but parties differ in the tendencies of their principles and measures and the ideal standards and training of their leaders. The Democratic party from its foundation, three-quarters of a century ago, has held

and acted upon ideas which tend to purity in government. It has exacted in its leaders a higher standard of official purity than any other party in the country. It has never elected to the presidency any man of as low a standard of official life as either of the three Republican presidents. Every Democratic national convention would, by common consent, have rejected from its nomination a man who had filled the public offices with his relatives, or who had been enriched by costly presents while exercising the immense power of the presidency to promote men's interest, or gratify men's ambition. Even in the corrupt times of James the First, the greatest intellect which has appeared among men, Bacon, was impeached by our ancestors, because, as Lord High Chancellor of England, he had received presents from suitors in causes depending before him. His defence was that he had decided those causes against the parties which had made the presents. Grant has decided the causes of those who were candidates for the great civil trusts of the country in favor of those who made him presents.

Jefferson left among the noble traditions of his precept and example the maxims that he would not appoint relatives to office, whatever their fitness, and that while in official life, he would do nothing to increase his fortune. He would keep himself not only pure, but he would hold high the standard of public morality.

I do not wish to speak harshly of the illustrious soldier who fills the presidential chair. He may not have been conscious of the evil in the fatal example which he has set. But when the two ideas of personal gain and the bestowal of office are allowed to be in one mind at the same time they will become associated, and it is but a step to the sale of the greatest trusts. Intellect, training, virtue, will soon succumb to wealth. Vulgar millionaires will grasp the highest seats of honor and power as they would put a new emblazonment on their carriages or a gaudy livery upon their servants.

I turn now to our own State. The era of Democratic ascendancy was the twenty-five years under the Constitution of 1821. Van Buren, Marcy, Wright and Flagg ruled. They were men of absolute personal honor and truth, and in all the counties they attracted to themselves similar men. They wielded party power not only for pure measures but for honest men. If a young man who had served one session in the Legislature came back to lobby, he lost his standing with the party leaders. Corruption in the legislative bodies was almost unknown. Even in 1836, in the wild speculation of that time, three Democratic senators who had kept back a bill about the Harlem railroad, in order to buy some of its stock, were compelled to resign by a Democratic Senate, and Young and Van Shaack resigned their seats because these senators had not been expelled.

Take the twenty-five years which followed as the era of the ascendancy of the Republican party, and of that party from which it sprang. Your legislative bodies are invariably found—almost immediately they became—purchasable. Twice within that time, the great office of Senator of the United States—the seat of Clinton, Van Buren, Wright and Marcy—has been put up at auction and knocked down to the best bidder. It was not in an assembly of German or Irish citizens, it was not among Democrats, but it was in the caucuses of Republican members of the Senate and Assembly, elected by the Republicans of the rural districts.

The municipal corruptions of New York city are the results of irresponsible power acting in the secrecy of bureaus and commissions. They are the outgrowth of twenty years of Republican legislation at Albany, and a partnership of plunder between men of both parties established during that period.

I have said this much as a demand of historical justice. I have no heart for such discussions. I know the mass of Republican

friends are of good intentions. I have no taste for a rivalry which is degraded into a mere comparison of the relative size of the leprous sores that are on the bodies of the respective parties. Let us rather engage in a generous emulation. Let the people judge us by what we do to cleanse our parties, and to purify the official trusts of the country, and to elevate the standard of public morality.

Principles are the test of political character. The Democracy always made fidelity to official trust and justice to the toiling masses, who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, a fundamental article in the party creed. It is time now to proclaim and to enforce the decree that whoever plunders the people, though he steal the livery of heaven to serve the devil in, is no Democrat.



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